



Review of *Serious play: Literacy, learning, and digital games*

Jeff Kuhn, Ohio University

Serious play: Literacy, learning, and digital games

Beavis, C., Dezuanni, M., O'Mara, J. (Eds.)

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The academic conversation regarding video games and learning has made a needed shift from advocating the potential of games (see Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2006) to investigating the successful implementation of games in classroom practice (Dickers, 2015). Clark, Tanner-Smith, and Killingsworth (2016) specifically call for more research into how curricular design decisions must adapt to accommodate the affordances of games and how games, and by extension gameplay, must adapt to the constraints of the classroom. *Serious play: Literacy, learning, and digital games* by Beavis, Dezuanni, and O'Mara, addresses this need by documenting how teachers and students are navigating the incorporation of games into classroom practice.

Van Eck (2006) has challenged games and learning research to push beyond championing games as engaging and shift investigative focus toward understanding under what classroom conditions games and learning are most effective. He further asserts that a lack of cohesion between video game content and educational content limits the successful implementation of games into classroom practice. Young et al. (2012) suggest that education's propensity for trading the often time consuming immersion of video games in favor of rapid curriculum coverage limits the effectiveness of games, as they are tasked with fitting constraints for which they were not designed. Steinkuehler and Squire (2014) recommend research that documents the practice of teachers who are adept at integrating into curricular materials the unique learning opportunities games provide.

Serious play is well positioned to address this gap in games and learning research. The book's documentation of the successes and challenges of developing both game-enhanced pedagogy and game-based pedagogy (Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012) provides practical guidance to teachers. Specifically, teachers keen on using Minecraft in the classroom will find the content of *Serious Play* terrifically relevant. As the authors state, the original purpose of the study was to investigate the use of games as a whole. However, the timing of the study coincided with the rise of Minecraft. To their credit, the researchers understood its influence on the classroom could not be marginalized and embraced the Minecraft phenomenon. Consequently, more of the book is devoted to Minecraft than was perhaps originally intended.

Serious play is commendable for devoting significant space to the narratives of teachers and students involved in game-based learning. These narratives color the book with authenticity and provide practical advice from both teachers and students. This is of benefit to educators who are unsure about where to begin

incorporating video games into classroom practice. As teachers embrace game-based learning, it requires developing skills in two intertwining threads: developing a games literacy to better understand the mindsets and cultural norms of their students as active agents in games (Kuhn & Stevens, 2017) and learning best practices and techniques that can guide classroom approaches to game-based learning. Through its narratives of teachers and students, this book provides a blueprint educators can follow in their journey to integrate their students' gaming worldviews with solid pedagogical practices in game-based learning.

What the work gains in breadth in regard to the application of games in varied classroom contexts, it loses in specificity for the audience of *Language Learning & Technology*. Save occasional brief paragraphs on the use of games in the foreign-language Chinese classroom, there is no specific focus on how games can be used in language learning. Even with this lack of language focus, foreign language educators would be remiss to pass on *Serious play*. The book's central premise of investigating how teachers and students interact with games in an educational context provides a robust blueprint for how educators can design classroom activities that balance gaming and traditional classroom practices.

The book is divided into 13 chapters, each covering, and sometimes overlapping on, an aspect of the Serious Play Project: a three-year research investigation into the use of video games in K–12 public and private education in Queensland and Victoria, Australia. The authors investigate three strands of game-based learning: using games, analyzing games, and making games. Using games constitutes any usage of commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) or educational game used in classroom practice. Analyzing games is defined by the authors as classroom activities that seek to understand games similar to books or film. The making games strand documents student-created games or the creation process inside of COTS games. The findings of these strands provide the organizational structure of the book, with *Serious play* divided into five themes: (1) student approaches to game-based learning; (2) changing gameplay for the classroom context; (3) teacher's work and game-based pedagogies; (4) digital literacies in the wild—multimodality, materiality, and embodiment; and (5) assessment, digital games, and teachers as creative professionals. Each section of the book is framed by an overview of the theme with two to three chapters providing an investigation of games in the classroom centered on that theme.

The focus of the first theme in *Serious play* proves a critical read for educators new to games and learning. The authors depict student perceptions of games in the classroom, providing evidence that the simple act of including games into learning is not enough to spark motivation and engagement. Students note that educational games are often too repetitive and childish to be engaging, while commercial games can prove to be a distraction to learning if used too much. The nuanced responses from students on the use of game-based learning found in Chapter 1 set a tone for the rest of the book of students as savvy consumers of digital content and astute observers of teaching practices. Chapter 2 offers a broad outline of what aspects of games and their mechanics engage students. In Chapter 3, Dezuanni and O'Mara acknowledge how Minecraft shaped the Serious Play Project with its rapid integration into the lives of K–12 students and how these students played the game outside the classroom context. This examination of how classroom cultural constraints can affect the gameplay of students should be required reading for teachers. After all, for many educators, the use of games in learning involves entering a culture and literacy practice in which students may be more at home than teachers.

The notion of a required evolution of gameplay when brought to the classroom continues in Theme 2: *Changing gameplay for the classroom context*. Mirroring the student voices of the previous theme, Chapters 4 and 5 focus on teachers and how these teachers perceive the dynamic and fluid nature of classroom gameplay. The lead chapter of this theme extends the discussion of how gameplay is changed within the classroom context and how game-based learning can alter the classroom identities of both student and teacher. The narrative of a teacher learning to adapt and follow the path set by students during the use of educational game, Statecraft X, in Chapter 4, demonstrates how game-based learning extends beyond the classroom into the social spaces and social hierarchies of the students. Teachers keen to use games in the classroom will benefit from the voices of fellow educators in these chapters as they explore how games, pedagogy, and student interactions must adapt to coexist in new ways.

Theme 3 is perhaps the most relevant to educators new to games and games literacy, with its focus on teachers' shifting perceptions of traditional literacy to account for the affordances of games. Chapter 6 profiles three teachers representing approaches to game-based learning: the non-gamer using traditional classroom practices to control gameplay, the drill and practice teacher who uses games in constricted manners prior to assessment, and the technologically innovative teacher using a Kinect-based game as a gateway to reading. Readers new to games will find the insights of these teachers an informative resource on how best to involve games in their own teaching practice. Chapter 7 continues this narrative thread of evolving classroom practice by examining how one teacher's notion of literacy is shifting in the face of new digitally mediated literacy contexts and how this new understanding of literacy conflicts and converges with state-mandated testing. This chapter is notable for its narrative on writing and literacy development in students through coding and game development—similar to the work of Howard, Staples, Dubreil, and Yamagata-Lynch (2016). Chapter 8 capstones this literacy theme with the experiences of a teacher using Minecraft and an accompanying wiki as a platform for student writing on the topic of environmental collapse.

Theme 4 again delves into the notion of games as literacy by exploring their dual role as forms of narratology and ludology. Chapter 9 presents three case studies in the use of games. The initial case study documents the use of game as story in a Year 2 writing activity. How the instructor utilizes Ratchet and Clank to demonstrate narrative structure is an insightful example of how games can serve as texts in the same manner as books and film. The second case study extends the discussion by profiling a librarian's evolving understanding of games as texts capable of engaging students in physical activity not possible with traditional media. The third case is a further examination of the game development class from Chapter 7, this time with more emphasis on the teacher's experience in leading students in designing narrative games. Each of these cases provides practical insight into the multimodal roles games can play in classroom practice that can be challenging for teachers to discover in games and learning literature. Dezuanni concludes Theme 4 with observations of how students assemble knowledge in both analog and digital contexts. As students engage in a project recreating their school, Dezuanni documents how students work in both Minecraft and Lego and their thought processes for working in each medium. This chapter again provides space for student voices and highlights that games do not equal automatic engagement, but students are in fact conscious of where they see a place for games in their classroom work and learning.

In Theme 5, the book concludes with a comprehensive analysis of teacher beliefs on the viability of games and learning in regard to assessment. Researchers reading *Serious play* will find Chapter 11 a rich source of literature on game-based learning and assessment. This literature review is combined with teacher perceptions of how to align the skills game-based learning fosters and ways in which these educators can map these skills to Australian curriculum standards. Chapter 12 briefly outlines a spectrum of game-based learning topic areas that could spur trajectories for novice games and learning researchers.

While the research agenda of *Serious play* does not examine language teaching and learning directly, each chapter offers insights and approaches to game-based learning that can guide teachers exploring game-based learning. Both practicing teachers and researchers can often focus on the motivating and engaging aspects of video games without delving further into the pedagogical and design decisions game-based learning requires. *Serious play* works best as a reference guide for educators making these design decisions to welcome games in their day-to-day practice. For game-based learning researchers, the book can serve as a research template for more studies centered at the crossroads of traditional classroom practices and games.

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About the Author

Dr. Jeff Kuhn is an Instructional Designer in the Office of Instructional Innovation at Ohio University, where he works on incorporating game design principles into face-to-face and online classes. His main research areas are distributed cognition, game-based learning, and virtual reality development.

E-mail: kuhnjl@ohio.edu